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Program gives foreign students crash course on Lebanon By Zeynep Goksel Special to The Daily Star Wednesday, June 11, 2008

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BEIRUT: At a time when many people are ready to give up on Lebanese politics and are seeking ways to leave the country for good, a group of students of diverse nationalities are in Beirut learning the workings of Lebanese politics, meeting political figures and touring the country.

This three-week program also provides 45 hours of Arabic instruction, which the participants said they appreciate

- they are happy that they are becoming somewhat able to order their food in Arabic, they added.

Beirut Exchange is organized by the Mideast Wire, a news-digest service that translates Arabic and Persian-language media into English. Based in Beirut, "we have students from all over the world - South Korea, the US, Mexico, Palestine, even Lebanon. This is an opportunity to meet, learn and listen to key politicians, academics and journalists about what [the students] have briefly heard about, allowing them to be better informed about this region," said Nicholas Noe, editor-in-chief at Mideast Wire and founder of the Beirut Exchange program.

With only eight weeks' notice, Beirut Exchange received more than 130 requests for applications, and by the middle of May more than 40 applications had arrived.

"This shows a tremendous interest in the region. Young people want to come here in order to listen, learn, and initiate dialogue," Noe said.

Although this is the first session of the Beirut Exchange - held at Hamra's Crowne Plaza Hotel - the experimental forum was meeting with initial success, Noe said.

Participants have met Democratic Gathering bloc leader MP Walid Jumblatt, senior Shiite cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah and Hamas representative in Lebanon Osama Hamdan.

They have also engaged in a number of seminars and informative meetings with academics and intellectuals. They plan to meet with Michel Aoun, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) on Friday, after meeting with three FPM officials for a briefing about the party. They will also meet Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces, and Nawaf Moussawi, head of external relations for Hizbullah. They are also awaiting a confirmation of a meeting with Prime Minister-

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On Tuesday the students had a discussion with Timur Goksel, former senior adviser to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (and this reporter's father), who briefed participants on UN peacekeeping policies and practices. In addition, Nadim Shehadi of UK think tank Chatham House lectured on "The Question of

Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon." Participants asked numerous questions and expressed their own views.

"This conference is a natural outgrowth of what we do at Mideast Wire. With this program we are trying to create and enhance dialogue between the West and the Middle East and leverage the vast educational, political and cultural resources that Lebanon has to offer, whereby improving the understanding of people interested in the region all over the world," said Noe, adding that he was very happy with the progress that has been made in the program so far.

"Many Lebanese should be lucky enough to have this experience. This is once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said Veronica San Millan, age 25, of Spain. She spent two months last year as an intern with a Lebanese satellite newscast. "This is a great chance to get to know the insides of politics in Lebanon, being able to ask questions and socialize with people who make the news."

Francisco Franco, 29, came to Lebanon for the first time only a week ago. "In Mexico, we get the US perception of the Middle East and conflicts in the region. I want to change that - I want to see it with Mexican eyes, my own," he said.

"I came here just to learn, to become better informed and acquire different perspectives that can only be offered to me while I am here," Franco said, adding that although the Lebanese community in Mexico is quite large, it did not seem that emotionally connected to Lebanon.

Michela comes from Italy, where meeting such politicians is nearly impossible for such a group: "The most anyone will ever get is a wave from afar, not more than a glimpse. Here, before I knew it I was standing face to face with Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah."



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